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Book Review

Stand Together or Fall Apart: Professionals Working with Immigrant Families

Judith K. Bernhard
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Over the next twenty years, it is projected that the percentage of people born outside of Canada will rise to as much as 28% of the population (Statistics Canada, 2011). In spite of this, Judith Bernhard, professor of Early Childhood Education at Ryerson University and author of *Stand Together or Fall Apart: Professionals Working with Immigrant Families*, contends that professionals working with immigrant families in fields such as education, health, counseling, early childhood, child and youth care, and social work, while well intentioned, are often ill-equipped to work effectively with immigrants. Practitioners in these fields commonly operate within a narrowly defined discourse of deficits, effectively subjugating these families.

The intention of this text is to inform professionals and undergraduates studying in these fields about immigrant families' strengths and to impart a series of principles that might become tools for helping professionals working with immigrant families. Bernhard also seeks to inspire reflection in readers, exhorting them to "examine their own attitudes and approaches and to become more self aware" (p. 16). The book is organized into three sections focusing, respectively, on the realities of immigration, the theoretical and practical tools professionals need to work with immigrants, and interventions that have been successfully used to empower immigrant families. The work is premised on two main assumptions; first, that immigrants possess strengths or funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) which are often rendered invisible or undesirable in the dominant discourse of deficits and, second, that empowerment must be the central goal of any work with immigrant families.

Bernhard contextualizes the first assumption by elaborating on the discourse of deficits that proliferates in academic research and filters into practice. This discourse derives from the work of Western developmental psychologists and assumes children progress through universal stages and milestones regardless of the social, cultural and economic circumstances of their lives. Immigrant children are deemed to be disadvantaged learners who lag behind their peers because these stages fail to account for contextually-influenced variations. By extension, their parents are seen to be lacking the "right" knowledge and skills to instruct their children (see NAEYC, 2010). In the field of early childhood, Bernhard is one of a growing number of Reconceptualist scholars to problematize this view:

> The problems and perceived problems of immigrant children and families are an enduring acceptance of mistaken assumptions regarding what is 'normal' in child development...cultural differences penetrate to the core and...should be honoured rather than remedied or ignored (pp. 60-61).

While Bernhard primarily references works in her own field of early childhood, her points pertain to any field that relies on developmental psychology for a knowledge base.

As introduced in chapter 1, this deficit discourse underlies dominant societal attitudes towards immigrants, who are consequently treated with varying degrees of antipathy, ranging from chilly to hostile, and are portrayed negatively in the media. Chapters 2, 3, and 4 contain a nuanced and layered analysis of how these policies and beliefs impact immigrant families; juxtaposing the reputation of Canada as a diversity-friendly nation with the "uncomfortable truths" of immigrant lives. For instance, Bernhard outlines the appalling working and living conditions of temporary and undocumented workers (which, surprisingly, may number as many as 600,000 in Canada) such as poverty, fear of deportation, lack of access to health care and education, and day-to-day instability. Bernhard eloquently relays the impact these issues have on immigrant families.

The dissonance between the values, languages, dress, religions, traditions, and knowledges of immigrant families and those of the dominant culture often leads to identity conflicts and loss of home languages in immigrant children. Credentials from back home are not valued, leading to situations such as "the house cleaner with a PhD" (p. 46). Moreover, un(der)employment, lack of resources, and the loss of social networks can lead to a variety of individual and familial stresses and concerns. Practitioners will appreciate Bernhard's concise synthesis of the lived realities of immigrants' lives and will find much to relate to their own work.

In chapter 6, Bernhard utilizes case studies from her own research focusing on three children and their families to show how the discourse of deficits is operationalized in the context of schooling. She profiles Monica, a Nicaraguan immigrant child, from the perspectives of parents and teacher to illustrate how Monica's cultural ways of being a student lead to her becoming pathologized as a deficient learner. This reads as a conversation between two diverse worldviews, each unaware of how the other is seeing this child. These brief but powerful vignettes challenge teachers to reflect on teaching and assessment practices which reinforce and reproduce dominant "regimes of truth" (Foucault, 1972). Furthermore, intervention programs for immigrant or low income families, as described in chapter 8, frequently emphasize accountability, predetermined outcomes, universal models of child development, and standardized measures and assessment tools. Such interventions disregard the cultural capital and strengths that families already possess, as familial input is neither desired nor sought in any meaningful way. One of the major strengths of the text is that Bernhard cites multiple examples from research and practice, and at both the practitioner and the program level, to encourage awareness of, and to interrogate, this discourse of deficits.

Alongside her discussion of this discourse, Bernhard advances the first aim of this work; to propose an alternate strengths-based approach. Several conceptual perspectives, summarized in chapter 5, aid the reader in reconceptualizing the discourse of deficits: Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital; González et al.'s (2005) funds of knowledge approach; and Cummins' (2004, 2001, 1996) scholarship on bilingualism. As Bernhard establishes the context, the reasons for and patterns of immigration, she counters the view that immigrants are "charity cases". Rather, the text focuses on the many unrecognized benefits immigrants bring to immigrant-receiving countries; including boosting declining populations and helping maintain existing social programs. Likewise, she makes a particularly strong case for the importance of home language maintenance, citing advantages such as gaining cognitive skills, maintaining family unity and channels of communication, providing cultural resources, developing a positive bicultural identity, and optimizing learning.

Contrary to Western standards of normativity, Bernhard suggests practitioners reject the notion that knowledge is an individual asset (or deficit) in favour of a systems theory understanding of the child as situated within a network of interconnected relationships and interactions. Development has multiple paths, like the branches of a tree. Immigrant children are no longer constructed as deficient when development has many possible—and equally desirable—paths and destinations. Bernhard also provides a more practical framework, developed by Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth (2012), which foregrounds context, specifically the links between the community and the child's development. Forty developmental assets, both external and internal, are identified within categories such as: support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social competencies and positive identity. Bernhard relates each of these to immigrant life circumstances, weaving examples and research support into her explanation in a thoughtful manner. Practitioners will find utility in this framework as the author illustrates how each of the developmental assets might be made culturally and contextually applicable.

The second idea addressed in this work, very much interconnected to the first, is that professionals must utilize approaches which empower families. Following Freire (1999), the concept of empowerment is explained theoretically and in relation to the work of the professional:

> ...for people to address an issue, they have to see it clearly...Individuals first need to be aware of the benefits of changing their circumstances in order to do so. Freire's emphasis on concientization (1999) sensitizes professionals to this essential first step. Parents need to have a say about their own process of participation. If the parents feel they are merely following prescribed procedures laid down by the authorities, then they are not truly empowered....The process of concientization involves honest dialogue between all those involved in creating change. Professionals need to act as supporters and facilitators of parents (p. 93).

Bernhard then considers how these understandings are brought into exemplary "interventions" with immigrant parents, a term which she, and many others in the field, use but is problematic as it implies a need to "fix" families.

In the final chapters, the author offers six examples of "interventions" distinguished for empowering parents and treating them as equals. Five of these are school or early childhood initiatives with Latino families in the United States or Canada (Bernhard's own research) and one is an early education program with Maori families. These programs all challenge the traditional paradigm of family involvement (see Souto-Manning & Swick, 2006). For example, Bernhard's study of a six week Parenting Circles program in Toronto involved twenty Latino immigrant parents who dialogued on child development and parenting practices and co-created "identity texts" about their families and goals in their home languages with their children. Parents became co-leaders of the sessions and some later felt empowered to create their own groups. Aware of the issues around accountability, the author stresses that each of these programs attended to, and succeeded, on standard measures of outcomes and well as on culturally defined outcomes. One noteworthy strength of this practically-oriented section is that Bernhard does not offer a quick fix, but is realistic about the issues practitioners might face in implementing similar programs, such as language (she recommends homogenous language groups), financing, accountability, and transferability. Further to this, the author cautions that since professionals are conventionally defined as holders of the authoritative knowledge, their

efforts to shift to collaborative models might be complicated. The section concludes with the "crucial elements of empowerment", as seen in these programs: identifying the cultural capital and funds of knowledge of families, including home languages and familial traditions to preserve cultural and ethnic identities, developing and assessing outcomes with parental input, and honouring the social and cultural contexts of the participants.

Due to the demographic makeup of the United States, research studies on parent involvement or programs predominantly focus on Latino immigrant groups. Bernhard's fifteen years of intensive ethnographic research with Latino immigrant groups augments our understanding of their experiences in the Canadian context. Since all but one of the examples cited in the text are drawn from Latino immigrant groups, it is critical to explore how the tools and principles Bernhard elucidates can be adapted to different contexts and cultural groups. For instance, the interventions described in the text are all parent-centred, but among some cultural groups the extended family might play a more active role in "parenting". Given the growing diversity in Canada and the shift from European to Asian and the Middle Eastern immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2006), the reader might also benefit from the inclusion of relevant findings from studies with immigrants from these regions (eg. Ali, 2012; Dachyshyn & Kirova, 2011, Schecter & Ippolito, 2008; Marshall & Toohey, 2010).

The format, while similar to Kağıtcıbaşı's (2007) comprehensive work, is more accessible to the undergraduate reader. The organization of the work into three distinct parts supports understanding. Despite occasional lapses into academic language, Bernhard explains complex theoretical constructs in a comprehensible manner and provides real-life examples to illustrate their meanings. This text should be required reading for senior undergraduate students or practitioners in the helping professions. Each chapter is clearly mapped out and could stand alone as a course reading. The variety of theoretical and conceptual perspectives creates multiple possibilities for the practitioner to adapt to the context of their work. Teachers in particular, will find resonance in the text due to the many school-related examples. While many American textbooks address themes such as diversity and the family (Trask & Hamon, 2007), working with immigrant families (Gonzalez-Mena, 2012); multicultural education (Huerta, 2009; Nieto & Bode, 2013; Robles de Melendez & Beck, 2013) and cultural competence (Moule, 2012), Canadian texts with a focus on immigrant families are lacking (Egbo, 2009 is one exception). Moreover, many resources are underpinned by the developmental discourse. Bernhard has composed a much-needed text which is distinctly Canadian while drawing in statistics and research from the United States and Europe to provide a more global perspective on the topic.

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